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Dance and Political Conflict

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Dance and Political Conflict

Three Comparative Case Studies

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Abstract: Can dance, as a non-verbal artform, effectively express political opinions? This paper examines three choreographic ways of dealing with controversial political issues, incorporating the works of artists in Germany, the US and Britain. The pieces have been chosen to represent three of the main trouble spots of the 20th century: World War I, the bombings in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s, and Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile. Kurt Jooss's epoch-making "The Green Table", first performed in 1932, sets the tone. Based on the experiences of the First World War, it is a stark reminder of the cruelties of war and an almost uncanny foreshadow of the events of World War II. Jooss's outspoken political stance forced him to leave Hitler's Germany for England as soon as 1933. American postmodernism is generally known for its rebellious and anti-establishment nature. The conflicts in Vietnam and Cambodia led to choreographies of protest in the 1960s and early 1970s. For instance, Steve Paxton, in his piece "Collaboration with Wintersoldier" (1971), collaborated with anti-war Vietnam veterans. Finally, the British choreographer Christopher Bruce tackled the issue of the military government in Chile. "Ghost Dances" (1981) uses an impressive image repertoire and Latin-American folk tunes to deliver dramatic visual effects and a powerful political message. The paper investigates how the three choreographers deal with the challenge of translating politics into dance; and how specific national or political ideologies feed into their works. It analyses the ways dance artists depict political conflicts and how they manage to advocate their views to influence their audience. By comparing the different approaches, one might trace the development of politically-orientated Western stage dance through the 20th Century, considering the extent to which later choreographers built on or modified earlier forms of expression.

Keywords: Dance, Political, Ideology

IN 1976 THE German choreographer Kurt Jooss asserted: *One should not try, in a piece of art, to improve life or mankind or politics [...]. That is not for the arts to do.*¹

This might appear an astonishing and controversial statement from an artist whose works have been seen as deeply enmeshed in social and political spheres. However, Jooss puts his finger on the heart of a major issue: the friction between aesthetics and politics. This dichotomy has experienced a long and distinguished history of intellectual debate and criticism. In Books II-III of the *Republic*, Plato rails against the subject-matter of much Athenian poetry, but he also clearly acknowledges possible didactic and social functions of art in the education of future political leaders. Equally, he regards gymnastics – another sphere in which dance partakes alongside the aesthetic – as a useful tool to train soldiers for warfare.² In the periods preceding the Romantic Age, frames of reference for art were provided by the aristocracy and the clergy. Early forms of ballet (court ballet), for instance, had a political rationale; they were a

“carefully calculated mix of art, politics and entertainment”.³

With the onset of the bourgeois era of democratisation, dance, like most art, was freed from its feudal bonds, resulting in more emphasis on the purely aesthetic, rather than political, focus of choreographic works. The influential French writer and critic Théophile Gautier, an enthusiastic supporter of Romantic ballet who highlighted the visual pleasure obtained from watching beautiful female dancers displaying their shapely legs,⁴ was a fierce proponent of the aestheticisation of art. In the preface to his *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, he opposes the idea of artworks serving extrinsic social functions: “Nothing is truly beautiful except that which can serve for nothing: whatever is useful is ugly”.⁵ His contemporary Karl Marx, by contrast, attempted to repoliticise art by challenging its assumption of autonomy, and communist ideology impacted significantly on a number of working class artists in early German modernism, among them the ‘red’ dancer Jean Weidt. Moreover, as aestheticism had reached a deadlock in the late 1800s, many avant-garde artists

¹ Kurt Jooss in interview, BBC I, June 1976.

² Plato, 1992, 403c, ff.

³ Au, 1988, p. 12.

⁴ See for instance his candid reviews of the female stars of the Paris ballet scene (Gautier, 1986).

⁵ Gautier, 1979, p. 57.



in the emerging new century strove to make political claims, increasingly drawing attention to the relationship between art and life. In 1930s and 1940s modernism, there were a few instances of political dance besides Jean Weidt's, such as works by Limón and Sokolow in the US. In spite of this, the German choreographer Valeska Gert lamented the insufficient reflection of pressing contemporary issues in dance, implying that much modern dance was escapist,⁶ and underlining what Bürger calls "the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences".⁷ And even in postmodernism and beyond, periods which seem to foster a more intimate relation between art and politics, the critical question of whether art can have political as well as aesthetic value seems to crop up again and again.

In the following, I shall analyse strategies used by Kurt Jooss and two other prominent choreographers of different nationalities and backgrounds – Steve Paxton and Christopher Bruce – for integrating politics into their dances, tracing a path of political stage dance through the 20th century. Dance research has recognised that dance is frequently entangled in political and social issues – concerns of gender and race, for instance, have been addressed at some length – but choreographic reflections of state or governmental politics have rarely attracted the attention of researchers.

All three choreographers chose to produce works about major political conflicts: World War I, The Vietnam War and Augusto Pinochet's regime in Chile. In the course of this paper, I shall consider to what extent the later choreographers built on or modified earlier forms of expression. It should be noted, of course, that politics does not necessarily manifest itself in content alone, but also through formal conventions and structures; a well-known example is photomontage as an analogue of socialist realism.

Kurt Jooss's epoch-making choreography *The Green Table* premiered in Paris in 1932 where it won the first prize in an international choreographic competition and universal acclaim. It is significant that this anti-war piece, choreographed by a German, was first shown in Paris – the city which hosted the Peace Conference in 1919 where peace treaties were negotiated between the Allied and the defeated Central Powers. The idea of "mobility across frontiers",⁸ as the cultural theorist Raymond Williams termed it, was a constitutive and progressive element of Modernism, all the more momentous as both France and Germany in the late 1920s and early '30s experienced a surge in nationalistic sentiments.

Jooss's piece was created against the backdrop of intense debate in Germany about the First World War. At a time when unemployment, economic crisis and the general malaise of the fragile Weimar Republic had reached a peak, politicians of all parties tended to interpret current events in ways that suited their ideologies – and the War was no exception. It was thus very difficult for an artist – in the realm of dance or otherwise – to exploit this theme without making, or seeming to make, a political statement.

In *The Green Table*, Jooss combined the theme of war – loosely based on the First World War as some costumes are fashioned after German soldiers – with the medieval dance of death. The dance is divided into eight scenes. The first and the last form a frame for the other six and show gentlemen in black debating around a green table; these men possibly represent high finance, or producers of war materials, who in Jooss's view incite wars for their own profit. The middle scenes first introduce the powerful figure of death, before presenting snippets from various war scenarios – battle, refugees, a partisan and the brothel – culminating in the seventh scene in which death slowly, in a type of round dance, seizes one victim after another. The piece ends as it began with the gentlemen debating over the green table, obviously unperturbed by the events, suggesting the ever-repeating cycle of political history.

The motif of the medieval skeleton and its dance of death carries a plethora of possible meanings. On the one hand, as a reminder of the brutality of war, the evocative image of death contrasts pointedly with the fresh and bright faces of those German soldiers in 1914 who set out to conquer Paris in just three days. It also questions the ideal form of the human body fostered by the Nazis, who by 1932 had become the dominant party in Germany's most important province of Prussia. The Nazi body image was embedded in a cultural Darwinism which associated the health of society with the physical strength and vitality of the individual. Equally, however, the medieval theme might be seen as rendering the symbolism of Jooss's piece more universal.

The dance employs an impressive range of iconographic images to convey its message, with each figure on stage being ascribed a particular movement repertory to capture his or her characteristic identity. Death, personified by a skeleton, uses heavy, muscular and angular movements. His steps are simple – stamping, marching, occasional *attitudes* and turns, clenched fists – and his image conveys absolute power. The profiteer, clad in white, with white gloves, employs staccato movements. His demeanour

⁶ See for instance Gert 1926, pp. 361–363. Additionally, many of her unpublished documents kept at the Berlin Academy of the Arts contain references to her specific philosophy of dance.

⁷ Bürger, 1984, p. 22.

⁸ Williams, 1989, p. 59.

is happy and carefree, but his appearance slimy and without much personality. Stealing rings from those fallen in war, he is portrayed as a petty criminal. The refugees are bent down by their misfortunes and make gestures of utmost despair, such as falling into the floor; they seem to gain some consolation however through their sense of community and shared fates. The girls in the brothels sway their hips enticingly – this iconographic movement was familiar to the public from Valeska Gert's famous dance of the *Canaille*. One woman is singled out – a seeming innocent who is captured and dragged forcefully into the brothel by the profiteer. Although her long open hair suggests unbridled sensuality, her timid and naive gestures belie this, marking her as symbolising the victimisation of women during wartime. The soldiers are characterised from the beginning as a homogenous group. Both sides wear the same costumes and, in the midst of the battle scene, mirror each other's movements. Their marching rhythm is in unison with the stamping of Death, indicating that such is their fate from the very first moment they set foot on a battlefield. The standard bearer's white flag, carried proudly and with dignity during the war scenes, ends up being tainted, like a hitherto virginal bed sheet, and controlled by the Death figure. Thus, even the symbol of national pride is ultimately conquered by the skeleton.

The key political message of the work is to be found in its opening and closing scenes. In his political discourse, Jooss was influenced by left-wing artists and in particular the leftist periodical *Die Weltbühne*, whose main contributor, Kurt Tucholsky, was a declared democrat, pacifist and anti-militarist. Tucholsky's aggressively political stance had an almost prophetic dimension in issuing impressive warnings about the forthcoming Third Reich, years before its actualisation. In 1929, in a spirit not too far removed from the Marxist idea of the abolition of nation states, he wrote that:

We deem the war between national states to be a crime, and we fight against it wherever possible, whenever possible, with whatever possible means [...] in favour of a country we love, for peace and our true home country: Europe.⁹

What Tucholsky documented in writing – namely the reactionary, monarchical and nationalistic forces of the Weimar Republic – the famous artist George Grosz captured in vivid visual images. Such works help to contextualise Jooss's; the green table which lends the dance its name can also be found in one of Grosz's paintings (*Eclipse of the Sun*, 1926) which depicts several gentlemen in black around a green table. Headless – an apposite metaphor for their lack

of rational independent thinking – most of the gentlemen remain anonymous, just like the characters in Jooss's piece. The only two recognisable figures are the general, a political leader whose power extends to the church and the military, and the fat bourgeois with weapons under his armpit who attempts to influence state authorities to his own financial advantage. The ordinary citizens are symbolised by a blind-folded donkey which awaits certain death (personified by a skeleton) if it accepts the capitalist bait.

In a progressive avant-garde stance, Jooss broadened the spectrum of modern dance by demonstrating that movement can have political intent. However, the audience is invited to conjecture by themselves what the piece will not say explicitly. Although received and understood as a political piece with a distinctly pacifist message, and even a propagandist work, Jooss managed to balance its political allusions with a more general humanistic message, lending his piece its dynamic and universal significance.

By contrast, our next piece sought to engage directly in contemporary politics. Steve Paxton's 1971 choreography *Collaboration with Wintersoldier* manifests the surge to political activism against the United States' involvement in Vietnam. This conflict escalated between 1964–68, during which time the first anti-war protest groups began to form in the US. The protest movement gained speed following the exposure of the My Lai massacre in 1969, during which several hundred Vietnamese civilians – including women and children – were brutally slaughtered on the order of an American platoon leader.

One of the foremost anti-war organisations was *Vietnam Veterans against the War* which, in the winter of 1971, conducted the so-called Winter Soldier investigation in Detroit, Michigan. Here, 125 veteran soldiers testified to war crimes and human rights violations committed by American military personnel in Vietnam, of which they were either eyewitnesses or indeed culprits themselves. These testimonies were documented in a film, entitled *Winter Soldier*, which successfully premiered in Cannes in 1972, but met with limited resonance in the U.S. which at that time was still involved in the conflict.

The American choreographer Steve Paxton used a 17-min short version of this film, entitled *First Marine Division* and available on a newly launched DVD, as a backdrop to his minimalist work. *Collaboration* was performed on 20th/21st April 1971 at the Whitney Museum in New York, the same two days when a few hundred Vietnam Veterans attended hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to end the war and marched to the Pentagon. Because no film footage or significant documentation of

⁹ Tucholsky, 1928, p. 472.

Paxton's work exists, I contacted the choreographer himself to learn more about this piece and his intentions in mounting it. Hence, the quotes used in the following are taken from our e-mail conversation of June and July 2006.

The piece's set-up was simple and reminiscent of what might now be called performance art, to apply a term borrowed from the visual arts. Two performers, dressed in blue workers' overalls, were suspended from the ceiling upside down; one on the right, the other on the left side of a screen playing the 17-min film short. What the performers and the audience saw were the eye-witness accounts of a large list of atrocities committed in America's name: tortures, the levelling of villages, murders (such as throwing Viet Cong suspects out of helicopters), rape, slaughter of animals, destruction of crops through chemical warfare and so on. One young man, named David Bishop, tells the story of four NVA nurses who were first tied to the ground, then spread-eagled, raped and tortured by slicing off their breasts and cutting off parts of their fingers with a machete, before being brutally executed.

Paxton used his performance to draw attention to the *Winter Soldier* production for which he claims he served as a "gofer and odds-body". He also sought to reflect and mirror his country's indifferent reaction to its own war crimes; the two performers, who hung upside-down and essentially remained immobile during the whole piece, symbolised hibernating bats. This work possibly represents the ultimate in what is known as reductive movement studies. Paxton's work often featured basic sitting, walking and standing, and in this case we have absolute stillness. Paradoxically using an image of immobility to mobilise people for a political cause, Paxton's work can be contextualised within experimental dance and other avant-garde art of the fifties and sixties, other examples of which include John Cage's 1952 piece 4'33, a composition of (un)interrupted silence, and Paul Taylor's 1957 choreography *Duet* in which one performer sits on stage and the other stands without moving; all of which challenge the minimal definitions of their respective art forms.

Paxton's reductionism is widely regarded as a way of democratising stage dance by stripping off its aesthetic decorum, negating the internal hierarchies of dance organisations and their artistic elitism; thus effectively bridging the gap between audience and performers.¹⁰ By relating his work to film, a popular medium that is often considered democratic because, in Williams's words, it "bypassed, leaped over, the class-based establishment theatre and all the cultural barriers which selective education had erected around

high literacy",¹¹ Paxton reaches a height of egalitarian artistry rarely achieved in dance previously.

Despite the fact that the sixties and early seventies were a highly politicised era, which saw the black, gay and feminist movements unfolding with full force, Paxton notes that there was little political discourse among dancers and other artists in his milieu. Their art, he comments, was "displacement activity, much as cats will turn to grooming when stressed, or even while fighting". With his progressive attitude, Paxton did not shy away from tackling serious contemporary issues in his art. He thereby not only exposed himself to critics who thought his work too mundane or quotidian, but also to those who, following Gautier, deemed the focus of an art work to lie exclusively in its aesthetic properties, denying its ulterior functions and values. Paxton's work clearly has extraneous, and in particular ethical, functions; it claims to dismantle the "grass-roots-contradiction to a mendacious US-administration". In particular, he notes:

In administrations where spin and lies come to spoil the communication between the populace and their elected representatives, people don't know what to think, and indeed, apparently tend not to think [...]. Hubris, dissimulation, secrecy, privilege as a working model, defended by scorn, generalization, appeals to patriotism, and a positive gloss on the achievements of the troops no matter that the war is lost.

The piece *Ghost Dances* by the British choreographer Christopher Bruce tackles the dictatorship in South America, and in particular human rights violations under Augusto Pinochet. General Pinochet's military junta, having overthrown the democratically elected socialist president Allende in 1973 in a military coup, established a long-lasting dictatorship of terror in Chile. Later indicted in connection with violence, murders and torture, Pinochet fought what he described as an anti-subversive war against the threats and disorders of Communism. A number of cases of the regime's systematic torture (including sexual abuse), imprisonment and kidnapping are compiled in the 1991 Rettig Report and in documents presented by several human rights commissions. According to most estimates, approximately 3,000 Chileans were executed or disappeared, and it was publicised later that some of the latter were dropped from helicopters into the sea.¹² Many more were incarcerated.

Although Bruce clearly intended to influence popular opinion, *Ghost Dances* is not designed as an incitement to engage directly in political action. The

¹⁰ See also Banes, 1987, and McDonagh, 1990.

¹¹ Williams, 1989, p. 107.

¹² Arriagada, 1988, p. 25.

work conveys a more universal message about the lack of humanity in totalitarian regimes, and Bruce's mode of presentation evokes empathy rather than political mobilisation. By the choreographer's own admission, his intention was to 'move' people to feel something for those suffering,¹³ reflecting Wantchekon and Healy's point that "(e)motions [rather than rational analysis] dominate the discussion of torture".¹⁴

Unlike Paxton and perhaps Jooss, Bruce did not reflect on the war machinations and abuses of his home country, but rather sought to attract attention to severe atrocities in a far-away land, which no longer received the public attention they possibly deserved. On the other hand, Bruce's choreographic interventions were timely in view of the British Conservatives' alliance with Chile over the Falkland wars in 1982, which cemented Pinochet's and Thatcher's friendship and over a decade later prompted the ex-Prime Minister to stand by her friend (indeed, she thanked him for "bringing democracy to Chile"¹⁵) when Pinochet was charged with human rights offences.

Bruce's *Ghost Dances* lacks the formal innovation of the two previous works discussed, but indeed in many respects does hark back to Jooss's 1930s piece. It has a similar length to *The Green Table* (approximately 30 minutes), comprises a similar number of scenes, and the development of the dance in several episodic phases is comparable to that of Jooss (although the British choreographer does not make use of a meta-narrative framework which lends the German work much of its political momentum).

Bruce's idea of deploying three skeleton-like ghost figures seems to parallel Jooss's conception of the figure of Death. But by contrast with Jooss's character, which remains relatively static, Bruce's ghosts are mobile on stage and use more contemporary forms of movement material, such as contact work. Their symbolism seems to be that of death, or perhaps more specifically Pinochet's henchmen. They interact with their civilian victims, who relive scenes from their lives shortly before being murdered. The ghosts dominate all the scenes, if not choreographically then at least thematically – they are already on stage before the victims appear and remain on the scene after they have left, symbolising their omnipresence. After they have seized their victims in turn, the latter are reunited in a final group dance in which they cross the stage diagonally in unison before exiting, seemingly devoid of agency, like marionettes handled by a supernatural power. This scene is reminiscent of the closing tableau of Jooss's internal nar-

rative where Death carries his victims off stage in a procession. Other iconographic similarities abound, such as the chain dances, the ways the victims are led away (gripping their capturers' shoulders) and details such as the broken arm line which in Bruce's dance seems to connote torture, but which is also used by the old woman in Jooss' ballet.

As well as adapting elements from Jooss's piece, Bruce stamps his own imprint on his chosen theme. While Jooss's work is accompanied by piano music by Cohen, specifically composed for this piece, which remains in the sphere of 'high art', Bruce favours popular culture by choosing songs by the pro-Socialist folk group *Inti-Illimani* as musical accompaniment. Folk art is often used, in various artistic and political contexts, to signify alternative values to the establishment – in other words, it suggests resistance to the prevailing socio-political order. By channelling his protest partly into pre-existing musical and kinetic folk discourses, Bruce invokes images of Chilean nationalism, embodied through bodily and musical practices.

Moreover, Bruce borrows movements from the torture chamber, which, abstracted and used as a recurrent motif, highlight the atrocities committed under Pinochet's regime. Performers with snapped off lower arms hanging down loosely and disjointed from the elbow, heads bent sideways as if hanging from a rope, and other iconographic details point to the afflictions of innocent people and methods of their torture or death. While Pinochet, through his torturers and hitmen, enacted revenge or intimidation upon his victims' bodies in a covert fashion – behind closed doors – so Bruce re-enacts and redescribes those methods in a public arena. By retaining their most typical iconography but making them a spectacle and transcended work of art, he turns these signature moves into accusations and a powerful anti-violence message. Indeed, while Bruce presents people subjected to psychological and physical violence and a climate of terror, the overall mood of his piece is remarkably positive. It figures, perhaps, as an expression of protest against injustice rather than a resigned statement of inescapable human terror.

In conclusion, these analyses have highlighted two points. First, choreographers have used a diversity of strategies to incorporate socio-political commentary into dance works. The political dimension of Jooss's groundbreaking piece is clearly set out from the beginning of the composition by markers of costume, setting and movement material. The fact that this piece has been taken, in the past, to refer to political circumstances other than those the choreo-

¹³ See Pritchard, 2000, p. 4.

¹⁴ Wantchekon & Healy, 1999, p. 596.

¹⁵ BBC news, 26 March 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/304516.stm>

grapher alluded to,¹⁶ points to its pluralistic interpretation and universal relevance. In Paxton's work, the signified (Vietnam War) seems to dominate the signifier (the performance); however, both are interdependent – the film is aestheticised, while the performers are politicised. Current American politics provided the unmistakable context of the work's perception. Bruce's piece draws heavily on Jooss's earlier work with respect to its structural composition, though there are also clear differences in terms of movement material and setting.

Finally, it is evident that all the dances draw on written or verbal language to concretise their political meanings. In Jooss's work, this is achieved through

an interesting ploy: mimed verbal communication in the gentlemen's meeting. Paxton's message becomes explicit through the eye-witness account in the film – that is the spoken word – while Bruce's interpretation of the political events are not, to the innocent onlooker, directly visible from the dance but have to be conjectured through the written commentaries in the accompanying programme or study guide notes. The use of language determines the degree of political concretisation and dimensionality of the works; all of which are nonetheless ultimately open to multiple aesthetic as well as political readings.

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¹⁶ See Huxley, 1982, p. 10.

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